DEBRIEFER'S GUIDE TO CRITICAL EVENT DEBRIEFING

Presented By:
1st Infantry Division
Mental Health Section

Purpose

- ✔ Quickly restore & enhance unit cohesion and effectiveness
- ✔ Reduce short-term emotional and physical distress
- ✔ Safeguard future effectiveness, happiness and the soldiers, unit and families well-being
- ✔ Prevent long-term distress and “burnout”

Critical Events which require a CED

- Death of a unit member
  - -By combat
  - -Accident
  - -Suicide
- Death or suffering of noncombatants
  - -Civilians
  - -Women
  - -Children

Critical Events which require a CED

- Having to handle dead bodies; other horrible sights and smells
- Friendly fire incidents
- Situation involving serious error, injustice or atrocity
- Situation where personnel feel total helplessness

CED are conducted by specially trained teams

- Mental Health/Combat Stress Control Officers, NCOs and Specialists
- Chaplains and chaplain assistants
- Physicians, nurses, and medics
- Unit leaders with CED training

Setting up a Critical Event Debriefing

- Who
  - -Unit to debrief in a group of 3 to 40 (maximum of 60 people)
  - -Retain functional organization (crew, team, squad, platoon, strangers, or civilians thrown together in a critical event by chance)

Setting up a Critical Event Debriefing

- Normally include only those directly involved in the event
  - -Include Higher Command only if present at event
  - -Close unit members who were absent by chance
  - -Newly arrived replacements as listeners only
  - -May include trusted support person, like the unit Chaplain or medic
  - -No media or outsiders permitted

Setting up a Critical Event Debriefing

- What

  -Ideally send team of debriefing leader

  and an assistant

  -Try to send one assistant for every 10 in

  the group more than 20

Setting up a Critical Event Debriefing

- When
  - -Ideally 8 to 72 hours after event
  - -After enough rest and recovery for all to be alert and involved
  - -During a lull in action
  - -After completing an operation
  - -Can be a shorter “defusing debriefing”
  - -Expected duration 2 to 3 hours

Setting up a Critical Event Debriefing

- Where
  - -Emotionally neutral place, safe from enemy action, distraction, observation
  - -Reserve position or assembly area
  - -Enough light to see all participants
  - -Sheltered from bad weather
  - -Comfortable conditions

Conduct Debriefing in 7 Phases

- ✔ Introductory Phase
- ✔ Fact Phase
- ✔ Thought Phase
- ✔ Reaction Phase
- ✔ Symptom Phase
- ✔ Teaching Phase
- ✔ Reentry Phase

Introductory Phase

- ✔ Purpose-Introduce the CED team and to explain the CED process
- ✔ Debriefing Team Leader explains ground rules
  - No one should ever repeat information to anyone outside the group
  - Does not override everyone's legal and moral responsibility to violations of the Law of Land Warfare.

Introductory Phase

- ✔ No notes or recordings will be made
- ✔ No breaks scheduled, could upset the process
- ✔ No one is required to speak, but encourage all to speak
- ✔ Each speaker speaks for self, not for others
- ✔ All persons are equal during CED
- ✔ Not an operational critique
- ✔ Fact-Finding, not Fault-Finding
- ✔ CED Team members need to be available after the CED for their own review/debriefing

Fact Phase

- Purpose-To reconstruct the event in a detailed, chronological order, as an unbroken “historical time line”, viewed from all sides and perspectives
- Leader-Gets participants to start at beginning, before the event occurred, then work up to event
- 1st person involved with the critical event is asked to tell how it started-what his role was; what he saw, heard, smelled, did, recalled step-by step
- Other participants are drawn in as the 1st person’s story reaches them.

Fact Phase

- Leader asks those who don't volunteer information what they were doing, seeing, hearing, etc…
- If there are disagreements about what happened then try to get observations that resolve difference.
- Discussion might proceed to later phases before reconstruction is complete. Leader should bring the process back to fill in the time line.

Thought Phase

- ✔ Purpose-Personalize the event and shift focus
- ✔ Leader-Leads transition from factual to emotional focus
- ✔ Participants-Asked to share what thoughts they had
  - -What thoughts were on your mind when it started
  - -What thoughts went through your mind when you saw, smelled, felt, etc…
  - -1st thought after you came off “autopilot”

Reaction Phase

- Purpose-To identify and ventilate feelings

  (emotions) raised by the event

- Leader-Emphasizes that all emotional reactions deserve to be expressed, listened to, and respected.

Reaction Phase

- Participants are asked and encouraged to share “reactions”

  -What was the worst thing about the event?

  -How did you react when that happened?

  -How are you feeling about that now?

Reaction Phase

- CED Team listen for common themes, feelings, or misperceptions
  -Feel angry at others for not helping
  -Blame selves or others for things outside their
  control
  -Feel changed, different, worse than everyone else, cut off from others
  -Survivor's guilt

Reaction Phase

- Leader and group confirm the normality and commonality of the feelings
  -Hearing that others had & have the same reaction helps
  -Judicious questioning about the facts restores true perspective on responsibility
  -Process can help individuals “reframe” the meaning

Reaction Phase

- Leader prevents “scapegoating” and verbal abuse
- Assures that distress and misunderstandings are clarified, not ignored or left to fester

Symptom Phase

- Purpose-To normalize personal physical stress responses
- Leader-Guides transition back from emotional to factual focus, legitimizing participants' physical symptoms and behavioral reactions

Symptom Phase

- Participants are asked to describe how their bodies reacted, before, during, and since the event
- Common symptoms
  - -Gastrointestinal distress
  - -Urinary frequency
  - -Loss of bowel & bladder control
  - -Loss of sexual arousal or interest

Symptom Phase

- Common symptoms (continued)
  - -Pounding heart
  - -Shortness of breath
  - -Muscle aches and headaches
  - -Trembling
  - -Jumpiness
  - -Startle reactions

Symptom Phase

- Participants are reassured to find other group members who have similar symptoms, and who often can find humor in it.
- Validates their own symptoms

Teaching Phase

- Purpose-To reassure by educating that the feelings & stress symptoms are normal reactions to abnormal conditions; they may last awhile, but can be expected to resolve normally
- Leader-Summarizes thoughts, feelings, and symptoms expressed by the group, reemphasizing normality, reducing feelings of uniqueness, weakness or injury

Teaching Phase

- CED Team
  - -May teach more about the stress process
  - -Instruct on grief process
  - -Educate about anger management
  - -If stress should continue too long or recur at some time of future stress, don't suffer, Fix It!
  - -Advise to seek out suitable person to talk it out with

Reentry phase

- Purpose-Complete and close the debriefing
- Leader-Gives final invitation for comments
  -Makes a summary statement to the group
- CED Team-Distributes list of POC's who can follow-up
  -Unit Chaplain, medics, aid station
  -Mental health officers/NCO's in area
  -How to recontact the debriefing team if wanted

Reentry phase

- Group may be helped to define self-supported activities

  -Could write collectively to family of the

  dead

  -Plan appropriate memorial ceremonies

  -Institutionalize lessons learned, seek

  to change “the system”

Reentry phase

- Important to have CED team members immediately available for 1 on 1 to talk to individual participants

  -So person can talk about things too sensitive to share in group

  -CED team can seek out those who showed or hid the signs of excessive stress in the group

Reentry phase

- Finally the CED team says
  - -”Goodbye”
  - -”Good Job”
  - -”Keep up the good work”

Follow-up

- Ensure that participants have follow-up options
- Some groups may want/need a second session when feasible
- Don’t encourage follow-up simply to keep the CED Team occupied.

Follow-up

- Consider other groups involved with the event
  - -Sister units
  - -Higher HQ
  - -Source of friendly fire
- Propose (plan for) an end-of-tour debriefing

Do not forget!

The Critical Event Team itself needs a debriefing after conducting one!!!

Summary

- ✔ Purpose
- ✔ Critical events which require a CED
- ✔ Conducted by specially trained teams
- ✔ Setting up the debriefing
- ✔ 7 Phases of the debriefing
- ✔ Follow-up
- ✔ Take care of yourself and your team